

Instant in Prayer

*“Rejoicing in hope;
patient in
tribulation;
continuing instant
in prayer.”
—Romans 12:12*

TWO HUNDRED YEARS

ago, in 1818, British poet and hymn writer James Montgomery penned these familiar words: “Prayer is the soul’s sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed.” Historians have noted that Montgomery believed proper prayer must come from the heart, and should be expressed with sincerity, fervor and simplicity. We can surely concur with the poet’s definition and sentiments regarding prayer. All our prayers should come from a heart that is overflowing with gratitude and with a great yearning to be in harmony with the Heavenly Father in all things.

The Apostle Peter indicates the condition of heart that is pleasing to God and that is possessed by those whom he accepts as sons. He states: “When once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God).” —I Pet. 3:20,21

Here the apostle tells us that the deliverance of Noah and his family in the ark was an illustration

of Christian baptism. He also makes certain that we understand which baptism he is speaking about. It is not John's baptism, which was for the repentance of sins, and the putting away of the filth of the flesh. Rather, it pictured the baptism that symbolizes a sacrificial death motivated by a "good conscience toward God." This implies an ever-growing sense of gratitude and appreciation so strong that it leads us to present our bodies a "living sacrifice," considering this to be our "reasonable," or rational, service.—Rom. 12:1

It is this same heart motivation which is to guide our prayers and petitions to the Heavenly Father. Jesus said, "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you." (John 15:7) This text gives us three basic requirements in order for our prayers to be of the greatest benefit. First, we must abide in Christ. This means, of course, that we have accepted him as our Redeemer and are striving daily to follow in his footsteps. The next requirement is that Christ's words abide in us. The thought of "abide" is that his words have become a part of our being, and have not found merely a temporary lodging place. Also implied is the fact that Jesus' words and the spirit of the words dominate our minds and lives. Then, if these things are true, we will ask only those things that are in harmony with God's plans and purposes for us, and these petitions and prayers will be answered in God's own way and time.

"INSTANT"

The phrase "continuing instant" in our theme text has the meaning of being earnest, to persevere,

and to be constantly diligent in prayer. We might ask why this is necessary. God knows our needs. If we ask once, this should be enough, we may suppose. However, to teach that “men ought always to pray, and not to faint,” Jesus related the parable of the importunate widow, who, because of her repeated petitions, had her request granted.—Luke 18:1-5

The lesson the Lord would have us learn is that God does not answer whimsical requests. Rather, they must reflect the desire of the heart, and by repetition we prove that our request is one of sincere, earnest motivation. There are other benefits also, as far as our spiritual walk is concerned. For example, persistence in prayer should make the ultimate fulfillment of our requests more greatly appreciated, as it will better enable us to view the outcome as being a reflection of God’s will for us. Another related lesson is that of humility. Perseverance in coming to the heavenly throne of grace in prayer should emphasize to our minds the Heavenly Father’s greatness. It will be a constant reminder to us of our own inadequacy, and of the great need we have for his overruling providences in our lives, as directed by his boundless wisdom, love, and power.

PRAYING “AMISS”

The Apostle James stated, “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.” (James 4:3) This text emphasizes the fact that the focus of our prayer life should be the New Creature. The word “lusts” means desires, and in this verse refers particularly to those which please the flesh. Jesus stated: “Do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? Or What shall we drink?

Or What shall we wear? ... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”—Matt. 6:31-33, *English Standard Version*

This does not mean that it is improper to pray concerning those material things that would benefit the New Creature. However, in this we must be very honest and careful in our appraisal of these needs to be certain we are not rationalizing to satisfy the desires of the flesh. In doing so, we must also take care, as Jesus states, to avoid being “anxious” with regard to our fleshly needs. God knows these better than we ourselves, and will oversee the provision of our temporal needs, the Master promises.

PRAY FOR STRENGTH TO OVERCOME

There are many things we can properly pray for. We should ask for strength to overcome the propensities of the flesh. In this regard, the Apostle Paul tells us where our Christian warfare is centered: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” (II Cor. 10:3-5) Paul further identifies our real foe, who uses our flesh to war against the New Creature. “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.”—Eph. 6:12

In these texts, the apostle tells us that the real enemy that would obstruct the development of our New Creature is Satan and his messengers. However, we can effectually oppose him through divine power. This is made available to us through prayer and close communion with the Heavenly Father. We are “mighty through God” in the casting down of Satan’s devices, even to the point of bringing our very thoughts into “the obedience of Christ.”

WISDOM ALSO

We should pray for wisdom, particularly as it has to do with knowing how to deal with ourselves. This is a most necessary ability to possess if we are to be overcoming Christians. Our minds, in spite of our best intentions, will at times try to devise a means or excuse to avoid sacrifice and self-denial in the Lord’s service. There is an incident recorded by Paul that illustrates this point: “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ. For even those who are circumcised do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh.”—Gal. 6:12,13, *ESV*

In this incident the apostle is telling us that some of the Jewish converts who had previously been circumcised now knew that through the liberty that is in Christ circumcision was not necessary. Yet when certain Judaizers insisted that believing Gentiles be circumcised, the converted Jews joined with the Judaizers in order that they might be received with favor. The apostle suggests, however, that the real reason the converts joined with the Judaizers was

“that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.”

This kind of circumstance is not foreign to any of us. How easy it is, for example, to make excuses to avoid an opportunity given us to witness to the Truth. Are these excuses valid, or are we perhaps trying to avoid an unpleasant sacrifice or uncomfortable circumstance? Having the wisdom to know how to deal with ourselves in these and similar situations is an important weapon in our warfare against the flesh. We can receive much help and guidance in this regard through prayer.

CHARACTER STRENGTH

We can pray for strength of character, that the ideals and principles that have been developed and set in our minds during our Christian walk will be firm under trial and temptation. There is a beautiful prophecy about Jesus that speaks of his example in this regard. “The Lord GOD hath opened mine ear, and I was not rebellious, neither turned away back. I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair: I hid not my face from shame and spitting. For the Lord GOD will help me; therefore shall I not be confounded: therefore have I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be ashamed.”—Isa. 50:5-7

With the Heavenly Father’s help we likewise can set and establish our characters through experiences that are permitted by him. Our prayers along this line will bring such experiences to us. Through them, if faithful, our strength along these lines will be developed, and after a time, we too will be able to set our “face like a flint,” in full confidence.

DEVELOPMENT OF FRUITAGE

We should daily pray for God's assistance in our development of the fruits and graces of his Holy Spirit. Our prayers along this line should be that he will provide experiences having the necessary lessons in them. Most importantly, however, we should pray that we will be rightly exercised and therefore learn the lesson of each experience. The Apostle Paul states: "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby."—Heb. 12:11

The peaceable fruits of righteousness are the fruits and graces of the Spirit. One of the definitions of the word "peaceable" is that which has a beneficial, constructive, and prosperous effect. The thought is, for the child of God, that such fruitage brings spiritual benefits and prosperity to the New Creature, though the experiences we may go through in this development may not seem "joyous, but grievous," at the present time.

SPIRITUAL FOOD

We should pray for spiritual food, recognizing the Lord's arrangements in providing it for our nourishment. First, it comes from our own personal study, with all the helps the Lord has so graciously provided for us. (John 5:39; II Tim. 2:15) It comes also from assembling together with our brethren in ecclesia meetings, at conventions, and in personal fellowship, "so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."—Heb. 10:25

Our spiritual nourishment also comes from the Lord's servants. "He gave some, apostles; and some,

prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” (Eph. 4:11,12) All these servants of God are sources of spiritual sustenance, and are provided for our growth. The burden of our prayers should be that we will be receptive to God’s Word. Indeed, let us daily hunger and thirst for it, that it may come into a good and honest heart and bring forth fruit to the honor and glory of our Heavenly Father.

MANY OTHER THINGS

There are many other things for which it is proper to pray. For example, we should pray for wisdom to keep from becoming entangled in the things of the world and for help in putting on “the whole armor of God.” (II Tim. 2:4; Eph. 6:11) We should ask for help in understanding the Word of God and for greater appreciation of his marvelous benefits. (Ps. 103:2) Certainly we should pray for help in our endeavor to manifest the spirit of the truth in all our actions. (John 4:23,24) We should pray for God’s coming kingdom and all of the interests associated with its establishment.—Matt. 6:10

In addition to praying for only those things that are proper, we should maintain proper decorum in word and conduct when we approach the heavenly throne of grace. For example, we do not believe it is proper to tell God all about his plan and of our wishes as to how he should govern the universe. It would seem more proper to listen to what he has to say to us. This we do by watching and waiting for the answers to our prayers, not by instructing God about

what we feel is best, nor by running ahead of him.
—Eph. 6:18; I Pet. 4:7

MODEL PRAYER

In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus gave the disciples, and us, a model prayer. Let us examine some of its salient features. Following the opening of the prayer, in which God's name is hallowed in deep reverence, the first petition is: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven." (vs. 10) We know that this is in harmony with the Father's will because it is a prominent part of his plan and its accomplishment. In the minds and lives of God's people the promise of the kingdom is the golden thread woven throughout the Bible. It is not that by our request we are intending to motivate God, or tell him when it should be established, but that we look forward to the time of its establishment because we yearn for an end to earth's dark night of sin and death.

When praying thus, we are asking for God's blessing on all his arrangements for the establishment of his kingdom. This includes the special work of the Gospel Age of calling and training a "little flock" to be associated with Jesus in that great kingdom work. (Luke 12:32) We should feel a personal interest in that work, since it is our desire to live and reign with him in that kingdom.—Rev. 20:4,6

DAILY BREAD

The second request of the model prayer is, "Give us this day our daily bread." (Matt. 6:11) We believe that the primary meaning of this request is for spiritual food. Jesus said in another place that he is the "bread of life," of which we must partake in order

to live. (John 6:48,51) He then explained what eating the bread of life really signifies: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." (vs. 63) Thus, in praying for our daily bread we are asking for a better understanding of his Word through the Holy Spirit.

It is through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit that the Truth is discernible to us. Jesus said, concerning our request for the Holy Spirit: "I say unto you, Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone? or if he ask a fish, will he for a fish give him a serpent? Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:9-13) It is as we partake of the nourishment from this bread of life that our New Creature grows and develops. This is wholly in harmony with God's will for us, and a most vital element of prayer.

FORGIVENESS AND DELIVERANCE

In the Lord's model prayer we are told to ask forgiveness. "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." (Matt. 6:12) We know that this request is in harmony with God's will, for he has made every necessary provision for the forgiveness of our sins. He sent his only begotten Son, who died on Calvary's

cross and subsequently appeared in the presence of God for us. (John 3:16; Heb. 9:24; I Pet. 3:18) However, the Heavenly Father has attached a provision to this arrangement. He requires that we demonstrate the same mercy and forgiveness toward others—especially to our brethren—that he has demonstrated toward us, for “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8) Forgiving others is one of the ways that we can demonstrate the realization of our own undone condition and our great appreciation for God’s mercy toward us.—Matt. 6:14,15

The final petition of the model prayer is, “Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” (Matt. 6:13) We are fully aware of Satan’s power and how helpless we would be if we were left alone to combat his vastly superior abilities. *Wilson’s Emphatic Diaglott* translates the above verse as follows: “Abandon us not to trial, but preserve us from evil.” The word “trial” is translated from a Greek word which comes from a root that means “to pierce through.” “Evil” carries the thought of “evil one,” or Satan. Jesus has instructed us to pray for deliverance from the evil one and not to permit him by trial or temptation to overwhelm us and cause us to fall. The Apostle Paul assures us of the Heavenly Father’s purpose in this respect: “No trial has assailed you except what belongs to man; and God is faithful, who will not permit you to be tried beyond your ability; but with the trial, will also direct the issue, that you may be able to bear it.”—I Cor. 10:13, *Diaglott*

We note here that the rest of the words in Matthew 6:13, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever,” are not found in the older manuscripts of the New Testament. They also do not

appear in Jesus' answer to his disciples when they requested, "Lord, teach us to pray."—Luke 11:1-4

The model and example of an acceptable prayer that Jesus gave us is in perfect harmony with the will and purpose of God. It encompasses most of the legitimate petitions of the consecrated footstep followers of the Master. Indeed, it is a guide we can use daily in our communion with the Heavenly Father.

COOPERATION NECESSARY

Turning again to the sentiments of our opening text, the Apostle Paul has instructed us that we are to be instant—earnest, persevering and diligent—in prayer. However, we have seen also that for these prayers to be effective they must be in harmony with God's will and purpose. Finally, we must strive to cooperate continually with God in harmony with our prayers. We must be willing to accept the experiences that he permits us to have in order that we might have our prayers answered favorably with regard to the New Creature's growth and development. For example, if we pray for patience, we will probably have experiences designed to develop that quality of character. These could be in the form of trials, perhaps difficult and prolonged.

The Apostle Peter states, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy." (I Pet. 4:12,13) If this be our attitude, we will be glad to approach the Heavenly Father habitually, "continuing instant in prayer." ■